



# **Catholic Faith, Life & Creed**

Doctrinal Catechesis Sessions for adults based on  
the Church Year, the Liturgy, & the Sunday Scriptures

## **Breaking Open the Word**

by Mary Birmingham

### **Baptism of the Lord – Year A**



Francesco- Alban, 1600's



## Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### Opening Prayer

Option 1. Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2.

### Prayer of Pope Clement XI

Lord, I believe in you: increase my faith.

I trust in you: strengthen my trust.

I love you: let me love you more and more.

I am sorry for my sins: deepen my sorrow.

I worship you as my first beginning.

I long for you as my last end.

I praise you as my constant helper.

And I call you as my loving protector.

I want to do what you ask of me:

In the way you ask, for as long as you ask, because you ask it.

Let me love you Lord as my God.

And see myself as I really am: a pilgrim in this world.

A Christian called to respect and love all those lives I touch.

Catholic  
**Faith, Life  
& Creed**  
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Breaking Open the  
Word worksheets  
connect with *Catholic  
Faith, Life, & Creed*  
Doctrinal Sessions.

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## Liturgical Context

- ▶ Today ends the Christmas season.
- ▶ It is part of the Christmas season but it also ushers in Ordinary Time.
- ▶ We are in the winter months of Ordinary Time Cycle A.
- ▶ The reason the feast of the Lord's Baptism is part of the Christmas season is because it is a feast of God's manifestation.
- ▶ God manifested himself to the people by calling his Son Jesus beloved.
- ▶ It is the beginning of his public ministry.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, then surface insights in the wider group. (@five to seven minutes)

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one of the readings.

## First reading: Isaiah 42:1-4. 6-7

- ▶ There are several opinions regarding who the Suffering Servant of Isaiah really
- ▶ One opinion states that the Servant represents Israel and its role as covenant people in relationship with God.
- ▶ The image of suffering servant belongs to Israel who, through its exile, was tried by God for its sins and was recreated in order to participate in God's plan of salvation.
- ▶ Other interpretations argue with this position and assert that the poem clearly refers to an *individual* whose mission is *to* Israel.
- ▶ The "Servant" acclaims that God called him from the womb to be a light to the nations. Thus, the Servant is an individual, not the collective Israel.
- ▶ Other interpreters say that the Servant was Moses; others believe it to be Isaiah himself. Some believe the *Suffering Servant* was a remnant, collective few who would remain faithful to God.
- ▶ Others believe the Servant to be some future messianic person. (Jesus referred to himself as the Suffering Servant).
- ▶ The early Christian community believed Isaiah to be prophesying about their Messiah and Lord, Jesus Christ.
- ▶ In today's liturgy it makes no difference which hypothesis is correct.
- ▶ This reading is chosen on this feast to shed light on the mission of Christ.
- ▶ Jesus is the fulfillment of Second Isaiah's word to Israel.
- ▶ It is Jesus who establishes God's justice.
- ▶ It is Jesus who reaches out to the poor and the powerless.
- ▶ It is Christ who assumes the role of Suffering Servant; who dies for the transgressions of many.
- ▶ Today's reading prefigures Jesus' baptism in the river Jordan.



## Mystagogy

### reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions.

- ▶ What does it mean to you that Jesus establishes God's justice--that Jesus reaches out to the poor and powerless--and that who died for the sins of many?
- ▶ How do you suppose Jesus would feel about all the dialogue surrounding the issue of health care in this country?
- ▶ If his mission were one of justice and care for the poor and powerless, for whom would Jesus be advocating?
- ▶ What are the implications for Christians?

### Second Reading: Acts 10:34-38

- ▶ This pericope from the Acts of the Apostles attests to the manifestation of God through Jesus Christ.
- ▶ Jesus' baptism is testimony to God's presence through Jesus' words and works.
- ▶ There are a few significant pieces in this reading, obviously chosen for its connection to the gospel.
- ▶ First, the story of Cornelius was a key moment for the early Church.
- ▶ Cornelius was a gentile. Through his conversion, credence was given to the gentile mission and to the inclusion, integration and incorporation of gentile Christians with Jewish Christians.
- ▶ Peter proclaimed that God has no favorites, all are called equal.
- ▶ Second, Luke's primary message is the proclamation that Jesus is Lord and Messiah.
- ▶ Empowered by the Holy Spirit, Jesus' ministry manifested God's healing and forgiveness and liberated those in bondage.
- ▶ He established a peace that only God could give.
- ▶ The response to Jesus' life and work was and is apostolic witness to his life, work and resurrection.



## Mystagogy

### reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in the wider group.

- ▶ If the message of Jesus is universality—that all are equal in the reign of God, for who is today's reading Good News?
- ▶ In what way is it good news for you?
- ▶ What are the implications for your life?

## Gospel: Matthew 3:13-17

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

### Gospel Exegesis

Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.) Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this Gospel mean to you?
  
- ▶ Both Luke and Mark see this event in terms of empowerment.
- ▶ Luke however takes it a step further. The baptism is not the empowering agent, the descent of the Spirit *after* the baptism is.
- ▶ For Luke, Jesus' baptism is a prayer event.
- ▶ The key thrust of this gospel is to proclaim Jesus as the Prophetic Messiah and Son of God.
- ▶ The anointing of Jesus by John highlights John's prophetic role in the messianic plan.
- ▶ However, Luke makes sure that all recognize that John is merely a prophet.
- ▶ John's message of repentance, revealed to him by God, is the star of the show, not John.
- ▶ John's role diminishes in order to stress God's anointing of Jesus through the Holy Spirit.
- ▶ Jesus is the new prophet, the Messianic Prophet.
- ▶ Luke insists that the premier event in this story is the descent of the Holy Spirit, not the baptism.
- ▶ This text reads like a baptismal liturgy.
- ▶ The words used hearken back to Scriptural texts from which we are to draw the meaning of the Spirit's descent.
- ▶ Jesus is God's beloved Son, "in whom I am well pleased", and his mission is from God.
- ▶ It is not the baptism that conferred sonship on Jesus that happened at his conception by the Spirit.
- ▶ The Spirit anointed and equipped Jesus for his mission.
- ▶ Another key theme in this gospel is Jesus at prayer.
- ▶ Luke's Jesus prays at every important juncture in his ministry.
- ▶ Jesus prays out of obedience to his Father.
- ▶ Prayer is integral to the life of the prophet, to the life of any minister, to the life of every baptized person.
- ▶ Jesus is empowered by the Spirit through his prayer.
- ▶ Luke's agenda is clearly to stress the importance of prayer in the life of the believer.
- ▶ Believers are empowered by the Spirit for God's work, just as Jesus was



empowered.

- ▶ Prayer and discipleship go hand in hand. Prayer strengthens, empowers and provides the stamina needed to endure the arduous responsibility of discipleship.
- ▶ Throughout Luke's gospel, some manifestation, visitation or apparition usually accompanies Jesus' prayer events.
- ▶ The audience of Jesus' day would understand the importance of such phenomena.
- ▶ In the Greco-Roman story world a flight of birds would be associated with proclamations of someone's destiny. Omens from heaven would be expected to ratify a person's status.
- ▶ Luke's audience would have been aware of the ancient story of Numa, one chosen to be king. He turned to the heavens and expected a sign before his kingship could be ratified. He looked heavenward in prayer and as the appropriate bird omens appeared he was willing to assume his kingly robe and was received as "most beloved of gods".
- ▶ Thus, listeners would understand that the descent of the Spirit was heaven's ratification of Jesus as the Son of God.<sup>1</sup>



## Mystagogy

### reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist shares first, and then invites participants to respond. See appendix #3 or example)

- ▶ Imagine that you are witnessing Jesus' baptism and a voice from heaven called out and called him "Son". What would be your response? What would it compel you to do?
- ▶ Catholics believe that when we remember the events of Jesus' life in liturgy, that we are, in a sense, present to them. So in some sense we are present at Jesus' Baptism. Imagine you were there and witnessed the events, what do you think your response would be?
- ▶ In what way do you now respond to the great gift of God's Son in a manner appropriate and befitting God's Son, the King of Heaven and Earth?
- ▶ What was the role of the Holy Spirit in this Gospel?
- ▶ What connections can be made today? What is the role of the Holy Spirit today?
- ▶ What evidence is there in your life that the Holy Spirit is at work just as he was at Jesus' baptism event?

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<sup>1</sup>Talbert, *Reading Luke*, 40.

- ▶ If the Spirit was preparing Jesus for mission, in what way is the Spirit preparing you for mission and for what is he preparing you? What is the mission he is preparing you for?
- ▶ What does the Gospel teach us?
- ▶ What does Jesus teach us in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this Gospel have to say to what is going on in your life right now?

Catechist invites participants to silently reflect on the following question

- ▶ What one thing are you willing to do this week to be a better disciple/prophet in your world? Is there something that needs to change in your life?

### **Concluding Prayer**

Option 1. Celebrate a minor rite—an exorcism or blessing for catechumens: RCIA 90-97

Option 2. Pray the Prayer of Pope Clement

Option 3. Other suitable, but brief prayer. (Perhaps pray the Prayer of St. Francis.)

## APPENDIX

1. WWJD is a common, over-used cliché. Very often people use it to support their own self-righteous agendas. However, The *Suffering Servant* of the reading from Isaiah most assuredly would care for the poor and powerless in our midst. The *Suffering Servant* would be filled with sorrow that the poor in our midst are not beneficiaries of the same dignities as people of means. The *Suffering Servant* would most assuredly be an advocate for appropriate health care for God's people as it is a God-given right. If I can say anything about the *Suffering Servant* who later Christians believed was Jesus Christ, it would be that he loved the poor and disadvantaged with his entire heart and soul. It is painful to listen to all the rhetoric about who is deserving of health care and who is not. I have heard many people say that it is a privilege and not a right. Thus, the privileged and those able to pay for it are the ones who should rightly have access to it. I am thankful for the *Suffering Servant* who died so that we all could have abundant life. I am thankful that the *Suffering Servant* loves all people equally.

2. We often pay lip service to the truth that all people are equal in God's eyes. I wonder how we would honestly react if a wealthy person stood heel to toe next to a person in tattered rags in our assembly? Who would be given deference? We treat our wealthy beneficiaries with far more honor than the poorer members of our community. It is part of the human condition. This past year a homeless, mentally ill person was put out of our assembly by one of our ushers. I say this only because I think we generally have the best ushers in the world. In this case, the poor man was not considered a worthy enough guest for our gathering. We could all be tempted to respond in a similar manner. All are equal in the reign of God. We say it with our mouths, but we have a long way to go before we believe it in our hearts. Cultural conditioning is a difficult thing to overcome.

3. If I daily reflected on the truth of who Jesus is and why he came to earth I would move heaven and earth to daily share the Good News with everyone I meet. I remember the early days of my conversion to Christ. I pestered everyone I knew about my newfound faith in Christ. When first touched by his power I remember having the privilege of simply resting in the Spirit for several days to meditate on his work, his life and his action. I often look back to that moment in my life as very much like the baptism of Jesus---God was manifesting himself to me—showing me his life and his love for me. I do not have such experiences often, seldom in fact, but I look back on that moment and I can recall the awe. When I doubt I turn to that experience and I remember. Sometimes God gives us glimpses into his heavenly realm and allows us to be privileged witnesses to the *Voice* that calls from heaven. Sometimes it is a faint whisper, sometimes it comes through those we love, sometimes it comes through events, but when it comes it is an invitation to take notice of what God is doing in our lives. That Voice who says, "You are my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased," says the same thing to us. I try to take that phrase and say it as if God were speaking it directly to me, "You are my beloved daughter Mary in whom I am well pleased." That news is so spectacular that it is worth shouting from the rooftops. I dare not be reticent or lazy when it comes to sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ.





## Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's  
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Baptism  
Holy Spirit  
Jesus Christ  
Confirmation

Evangelization  
Miracles  
Salvation/Soteriology  
Incarnation

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the index of doctrinal topics and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

### **BAPTISM**

Today's liturgy remembers and makes present the baptism of Jesus and the commissioning of his public ministry. It is most appropriate that Jesus' own baptism prompt us to reflect on what the sacrament of baptism means to us today. Today's extended doctrinal session will focus on the sacrament of BAPTISM.

### **HOLY SPIRIT**

The Holy Spirit came upon Jesus and empowered him for his mission to establish the kingdom of God and accomplish his salvific mission in the world. The Holy Spirit similarly empowers us. The Spirit works in our lives and in our Church to continue the work Jesus began. It is thus a most appropriate occasion to reflect on what the Church teaches us about the HOLY SPIRIT.

### **JESUS CHRIST**

Jesus was empowered for his public mission. His mission begins as the Voice from heaven proclaims him God's Son. It is an appropriate time to reflect on the fullness of Jesus and his mission. Thus today we will focus our doctrinal session on JESUS CHRIST.

### **CONFIRMATION**

In today's Gospel the Spirit descends upon Jesus at his baptism. In the Rite of Christian Initiation the Spirit is conferred through the sacrament of confirmation when the believer is baptized. Thus, today would also be an appropriate occasion to learn more about the SACRAMENT OF CONFIRMATION.

## EVANGELIZATION

Jesus was empowered for his public mission. We too are empowered as priest, prophet and king through our own baptism; priest to serve God's people, prophet to proclaim the word of God by our words and our actions, and king to lead people to Christ. We live our baptismal commitment by evangelizing the world. When God calls us we can always expect God wants us to evangelize others---to share our faith with the world. Today's doctrinal session will focus on the implications of God's call. Each of us is called to evangelize the world. Thus today's extended session will address the doctrinal issue of EVANGELIZATION.

## MIRACLES

Luke often used the vehicle of miracles to bring people to initial conversion in Christ. Miracles were the catalyst that opened people's eyes to really encounter the Christ. The people witnessed a miracle when the Spirit descended upon Jesus. Today's liturgy invites a reflection on the role of MIRACLES in Christian life--what we believe about them, their intended purpose, etc. Today's doctrinal extended session will focus on what the Church teaches us about MIRACLES.

## SALVATION/SOTERIOLOGY

Today's liturgy is the inauguration of Jesus public ministry. It is thus the beginning of God's plan of salvation for the world. Today's doctrinal extended session will focus on what the Church teaches about the SALVATION Jesus came to bring to the world.

## INCARNATION

While most often the INCARNATION is a topic for the Christmas season, since this feast ends the season it is still appropriate to focus our attention on the implications of the INCARNATION. Jesus' universal message of salvation, his healing, reconciling mission is made possible only because God sent his Son to save the world. Today he proclaims Jesus his Son and thus inaugurates the kingdom he came to establish. Without the INCARNATION his saving mission would not be possible. Today's doctrinal extended session will focus on the mystery of the INCARNATION of Christ and the implications for our lives today.